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# A Serious Man

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *A Serious Man* (2009).

“Receive in simplicity every thing that happens to you.”

-Rashi

The Coen brothers’ latest film, *A Serious Man*, opens with the above guiding principle, written hundreds of years ago by a medieval Rabbi. Although the film itself is not something easily received in simplicity, this maxim lends a specific tenor to its interpretation.

*A Serious Man* is a story of religious predicament. It is of the modern individual seeking meaning in an indifferent universe and from a seemingly absent God.

The protagonist of the film, Larry Gopnik, is a decent man. But he is also an uncertain man. He longs to be ‘a serious man’ but seems unable to find the spiritual certainty necessary. The more he seeks this certainty, the more evasive it seems to become and all in the wake of an epic Job-like misfortune. So, we ask, what does this modern day Job story have to offer us?

The Coen brothers will tell you: not much. Except, perhaps, that their caustic retelling seems to reconfirm what we already know: religion often does not survive our own existential unraveling. But of course this is not what happened in

Job's case. His story has become a beacon of hope in the Judeo-Christian canon. So what is different about Larry Gopnik?

At a glance Larry's plight differs little from Job's: both stories are characterized by overwrought devastation, although Larry's devastation is more attuned to the uncomfortable hues of tragicomedy. After receiving a bribe from a dissatisfied college physics student, Larry learns that his unhappy wife plans on leaving him. The Gopnik home is burdened by the presence of Larry's brother, Arthur, who, when not writing algorithms, is laboriously draining his neck cyst. The two Gopnik children are self-absorbed and uninspiring to say the least and Larry is suffering increasing expenses on account of their adolescent ways. Larry's health and career are in jeopardy. And while the bills pile up, Larry is served the additional injustice of paying the funeral expenses of his wife's suddenly deceased suitor.

To all of this Larry replies, 'but I didn't do anything.' Yet, Larry informs his physics students after explaining the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, 'the only thing we can be certain of is uncertainty.'

Structurally mimicking Job's threefold interaction with his friends, Larry's misery is roughly divided into three chapters, which constitute three comedic interactions with different Rabbis. Facing exhausting misfortune, Larry encounters

increasingly unhelpful spiritual guidance. The first junior Rabbi, in a misguided attempt at poignant reflection, encourages Larry to ‘just look at the parking lot’ as if even the most banal contains spiritual revelation. Larry’s personal experience, however, has affirmed for him just the opposite. The second meeting with a more advanced Rabbi proves just as fruitless and Larry is led along a strangely pointless tale of a ‘goy’s teeth. The fact that Larry is perpetually denied access to the final and most desirable Rabbi can be read as a metaphor for a mounting inaccessibility to illuminating religious experience. And just as Larry can see the third Rabbi but not have counsel with him suggests that, despite how close Larry comes to spiritual knowledge, he will never find meaning.

What purpose, then, does religion serve? When we cannot find correspondence between our beliefs and our existence, how then can we engage with our beliefs? How can we relate our beliefs to what we understand as truth?

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno write, “only thought which does violence to itself is hard enough to shatter myths.” This notion invites what, throughout *A Serious Man*, Larry resists: the failure of religion. There are undoubtedly areas where religion fails in *A Serious Man*. The task that Larry faces is to allow his own existential experience to refine his spiritual experience, to shatter the myths of religion. Larry must make the same decision Job did: to turn towards or away from God. But regardless of his decision, Larry must allow a

certain violence to be done to religious thought, in order to allow his understanding of religion to deepen.

Larry tells his students that even though they may not understand the Uncertainty Principle, they are ‘still responsible for it on the midterm.’ In the face of uncertainty, we are still responsible agents, and perhaps especially for the sake of our own spirituality. Ultimately this may be Larry’s simplest answer, the way to receive his misfortune with simplicity as Rashi teaches.